

TOP Survey To Date

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Background & Objectives

Agencies charged with planning and maintaining the nation's immense and complex transportation system are operating in an environment of unprecedented change. Evolving demands for transportation services, new technologies, workforce composition, stakeholders' concerns, and a constantly changing political environment create continuing demands for change.

To address these challenges, the role of strategic planning is increasing in significance and importance. As part of this process, there has been an increase in the use of performance measurement. A factor in this increased use was the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, which directed federal agencies to develop formal mechanisms for measuring and reporting performance. At the same time, the use of performance measurements has spread across the nation to state and local agencies, including many state departments of transportation. Most performance measurement has relied on internal measures of performance. Recently, some agencies are employing more innovative solutions to understand and measure performance, such as an increased focus on stakeholder consultation and customer needs.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) also has sought citizen input and feedback on the quality of the nation's transportation system. Three separate surveys were

conducted in 2000: *Operations and Planning / Environment Survey*, *Infrastructure Survey*, and *Federal Lands Survey*. The *Infrastructure Survey* is a follow-up to the 1995 *National Highway User Survey* conducted by the National Quality Initiative (NQI), now the National Partnership for Highway Quality.

This year, the five program offices at FHWA – Infrastructure; Operations; Planning, Environment, and Realty; Safety; and Federal Lands –have partnered with FHWA Office of Corporate Management to conduct a single comprehensive survey.

The overall objective of the TOP Survey is to provide a reliable measure of travelers' awareness, use, and perceptions of the nation's highway. The survey will also determine what progress has been made over the years. Results from the research will be used to identify areas for possible improvements that federal and state highway agencies could take to improve the traveling public's satisfaction with the transportation system.

Methodology

The research consists of four primary phases. The first phase is exploratory in nature and consists of two components: (1) an environmental scan, i.e., survey of surveys and (2) focus group research. More information on this first phase is provided in this update.

Following the exploratory research, the final quantitative measurement system will be developed. The proposed survey will use many of

National TOP Survey

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Phase I: Survey of Surveys

the same questions as earlier surveys to allow for comparison of results over the years. Additional questions will be added to address the breadth of current programs visible to the public and to address current issues in transportation planning and management.

A total of 2,500 randomly selected persons will be surveyed by telephone nationwide. The sample will be stratified by region of the country and an approximately equal number of interviews will be conducted in each region. A minimum of 25 interviews will be conducted in each state. This will ensure that reliable analysis can be conducted at both the national and regional level.

Telephone data collection using random digit dial (RDD) sampling is the best sampling and data collection methodology for conducting research that needs to be projected to the general population. We anticipate a participation rate in excess of 50 percent among those contacted.

Results

The TOP Survey will provide a wealth of data that can be used for many years. Survey results will be used to gauge and track general public perceptions of transportation planning, infrastructure, safety, operations, and service. A set of easy-to-understand indices of travelers' opinions and perceptions at the national level will be developed for future tracking. Conclusions as to the implications of the results for future planning will be drawn. Finally, results will be translated into a set of Strategic Imperatives – concrete strategies for improvement that federal, state, and local transportation agencies could apply to improve the traveling public's satisfaction with the transportation system.

Background & Objectives

Considerable research on the general public's awareness of, attitudes toward, and use of transportation and transportation services is conducted each year for a wide variety of purposes. In addition, other research provides information on changes in consumer attitudes and behavior that also have implications for transportation planning and policy.

While much of this research is in the public domain and available through a wide variety of sources, considerable effort is required to obtain this data and sort through the myriad of results.

The purpose, therefore, of the proposed E-Scan is to develop a system for routinely gathering and disseminating relevant research. In addition, the E-Scan will interpret the data and determine the implications of the results for transportation planning, policy, and other research.

Methodology

The focus of the environmental scan is to review existing national, state, regional, and local surveys of the public regarding their experiences with the transportation system, as well as related perspectives on transportation related community and environmental issues, institutional and intergovernmental issues, etc. The scan will provide some understanding of the context of public perceptions towards transportation based on other surveys. Results from this environmental scan will be used as input into the design of the FHWA's own survey.

We have begun the E-Scan by doing a "Survey of Surveys" – contacting state DOTs and local MPOs to identify relevant research. Following is but one example of the type of research currently being conducted.

Kansas DOT – Road Rally

During the summer of 2001, the Kansas Department of Transportation conducted Road Rallies with a randomly recruited sample of Kansas residents. More than 500 persons from 10 counties participated in Road Rallies that were held in six locations. Upon arrival, participants were given an overview of the course and directions on how to complete the survey. Those attending were then divided into small groups of approximately 5-7 persons each.

The groups then boarded 15-passenger vans. A professional moderator accompanied each of the groups during the course to facilitate the administration of the survey and to ensure consistent interpretation of the questions. Each course consisted of 11-19 different sections of highway. The route was designed to ensure that participants would be exposed to a wide range of highways with regard both to the type and condition of the highway. The research identified features that Kansas residents think are most important on different types of highway, determined expectations for the condition of Kansas highways, and objectively measured perceptions about priorities for the State's highway system.

If you know of . . .

Some interesting and/or innovative research on traveler satisfaction with transportation or transportation services that you think should be shared with others, let us know so that we can include in the E-Scan by emailing mskipper@nwrq.com.

Phase I: Focus Groups

State Participation *(cont'd from previous column)*

Background & Objectives

Focus groups are being used to gain an in-depth understanding of how travelers think and talk about the nation's transportation system. This insight helps develop specific and meaningful questions and ensures that no important area of questioning is overlooked in the quantitative research. This research phase ensures that we learn to talk about services, programs, and benefits using the voice of the traveler. This will ensure that the questionnaire is written using words and phrases that are understandable to the public.

Methodology

Focus groups are being held in five cities across the country. Cities were carefully selected to represent different regions of the country, travelers' travel patterns, and other characteristics:

- East: Boston
- South: Dallas / Fort Worth
- Midwest: Minneapolis
- West: Boise

When identifying criteria for the focus groups, the goal was to provide for both similarity and contrast within a group. As a rule, it is not desirable to combine participants from different social classes or who have very different behaviors, because of differences in their perceptions and experiences. As travel patterns vary significantly by age, the groups are segmented by age – 18 to 44 and 45 plus. In Phoenix, an older target market was sought; groups are again segmented by age – 55 to 69 and 70 plus.

Within these otherwise homogenous groups, providing for a spark to be occasionally struck by introducing contrasting opinions is helpful. To accomplish this, a mix of people are recruited within each group using demographic characteristics – gender, ethnicity, and race – and

travel characteristics – modes used, amount of travel, and type of travel.

Mini-groups – 6 to 8 participants – are being used instead of traditional – 8 to 10 participants – allowing for more topics to be covered and more time to be spent on each topic. All participants – even the most reticent – have time to participate.

State Participation

Background

For the first time in 2004, FHWA has added a new feature so states have the option to participate in the National TOP Survey by purchasing additional samples – providing greater analytical power at the national level and an opportunity to see how their customer satisfaction data compares with the U.S.

States may participate by purchasing additional samples – minimum commitment is 400 surveys. A skilled research team will work with your state to build a survey instrument that supports benchmarking and tracking, yet addresses the specific issues of your state. Final deliverables will include a robust sample of statewide citizens, a set of cross tabulations of key variables, and a summary report. The results may be used for a variety of purposes including measuring and tracking public satisfaction with roadways, identifying the issues that the public feels are important, and ultimately, developing strategic imperatives that will translate into increased satisfaction with each state's infrastructure.

A Web Meeting was held on February 20, 2004. Participants included FHWA Division Administrators, some state DOT

representatives, FHWA project team members, and members of the NWRG consultant team – Rebecca Elmore-Yalch and Dr. Peter Everett.

Participants were given an overview of the project. Since this Web Meeting, several states have raised additional questions. In addition, the FHWA has finalized the process for waiving the state match for funds if using Statewide Planning and Research (SPR) and Metropolitan Planning (PL) funds and has set up the process for applying for these funds. Following are answers to some of these questions as well as instructions on how to take advantage of the pooled fund.

Questions & Answers

Q: We would like to conduct additional interviews in our state. Can that be done?

A: Yes. The requested minimum contribution is \$30,000 per state. This minimum contribution purchases a total sample of 400 completed surveys.

States may contribute to obtain larger samples, at a rate of \$3,000 for each additional 100 samples. For example, if a state wants to do 800 interviews, the total contribution would be \$42,000.

Larger sample sizes would have the effect of increasing the reliability of the data. For example, 400 random samples results in a margin of error of roughly plus or minus 5 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. If a state increases the sample size to 800, the margin of error would be no more than plus or minus 3.5 percent. This increased sample size would also allow a state to do more detailed analysis among key subgroups – e.g., by region of the state or traveler type.

State Participation

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Q: Do we have to use the TOP Survey questions or can we include questions of our own?

A: The TOP Survey will include a set of core questions that will be asked in all states. This will allow participating states to compare their data against the national data and will allow the FHWA to conduct additional, in-depth analysis of the data.

Each state will be able to include approximately 10 questions of their choice, one of which can be an open-ended question. The research consultant will work directly with the state to develop the state's final sampling plan, questionnaire, and research program.

Q: What will participating states receive as a project deliverable?

A: Each participating state will receive a similar set of deliverables as the FHWA. This will include a complete set of custom data tabulations that will allow you to see differences in responses among key segments within your state. A research professional will work directly with you to determine what specific breakdowns will be most useful. In addition, you will receive a Summary Report of the research. This report will include an overview of the project objectives and methodology, an analysis and interpretation of key research results, and conclusions and recommendations based on these results, as appropriate. Finally, a research professional will be available to present the results to members of your organization.

Q: How will individual state data be kept confidential?

A: Results from the national study will provide measures of overall system performance, nationally and within key subgroups. There will be no state-to-state comparisons or peer group rankings. Moreover, individual state data will be kept confidential (i.e., there will be no identifying information (e.g., zip codes or state names) in any datasets available for general dissemination that will allow state-to-state comparative analysis). Each state will receive a data set that contains their individual state results.

Q: How do we apply for the pooled fund?

A: We are asking for tentative commitments by April 30, 2004. The deadline for commitment is June 30, 2004. For information on how to apply for the pooled fund, please visit: <http://www.pooledfund.org> or contact Connie Yew at (202) 366-1078, connie.yew@fhwa.dot.gov.

You may also visit:

<http://www.pooledfund.org/projectdetails.asp?id=852&status=1>

for specific information on this project and the pooled fund.

Key Dates

Focus Groups

March 16, 2004, Boston, MA

March 18, 2004, Dallas, TX

March 23, 2004, Minneapolis, MN

March 25, 2004, Phoenix, AZ

For more information on the focus groups contact Michael Skipper at NWRG by phone (208.364.0171); or e-mail (mskipper@nwrng.com).

States

Web Meeting

April 20, 2004; 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. (EST)

The focus of this Net Meeting will be to provide an update on the research to date and to present the first draft of the National TOP Survey. There will be time for questions and answers.

April 30, 2004

Indication of Interest

To aid in planning, States are asked to provide an initial indication of interest in participating in the TOP Survey.

June 30, 2004

Deadline for Participation in Fall Data Collection

For more information on state participation, contact Connie Yew at FHWA (202.366.1078) (Connie.Yew@fhwa.dot.gov); or Rebecca Elmore-Yalch at NWRG (208.364.0171) (byalch@nwrng.com).

FHWA Meetings

April 8, 2004; 1:00 – 4:00 p.m.

FHWA Headquarters

This will be a meeting of the FHWA Project and Leadership Teams. Focus of the meeting will be to:

- Review results of the E-Scan and Focus Group research
- Review first draft of the TOP Survey Questionnaire